Commissioning research

Introduction

Research is an extremely important part of your advocacy work. It should help you to understand your issue better. It is essential to strengthen your argument. It might give you an opportunity to strengthen your networks or deepen your relationship with members. The appointment of consultants might also be the first time that you have dedicated substantial resources to the advocacy issue.

Simple decisions made at the beginning of your advocacy research will strongly determine the quality and value of your research.

Planning research

There are four stages in planning research:

- Clarifying the issue
- Choosing the methods
- Considering analysis
- Considering presentation

Clarifying the issue

Framing the advocacy issue is probably the most important task in producing a powerful research report. If the issue is framed too narrowly then possible solutions will be unintentionally omitted. If the issue is framed too widely, or is too vague, then the research effort will be dissipated and the argument weakened.

To frame an advocacy issue you need to think about:

- The nature of the problem
- The possible causes of the problem
- Who is affected by the problem
- How businesses and people are affected
- How many businesses and people are affected by the problem
- The policy background for the problem area
- Possible solutions and their history

You won't know the answer to all these questions before the research. You should, however, have guesses (hypotheses) about each of these and you should make an explicit decision about which of the questions most needs research in order to strengthen your argument.

Don't be afraid to spend considerable time thinking about framing the advocacy issue. The most common reason for weak research is a vague or unfocused brief.

Choosing the methods

You should choose the methods after you have identified the key research questions – and if you use consultants, you should encourage them to make suggestions for the methods. All methods have strengths and weaknesses so you might need several different, complementary methods.

It is important that the methods are credible, rigorous and valid. That is to say, they need to be impressive to the reader, replicable and to measure what they say they are measuring.

Think about the following issues in planning the methods:

- Who should the researcher interview or survey? It is best to ask questions directly of the person experiencing a problem rather than getting someone else to answer on their behalf.
- How should the researcher select interviewees? It is important that the researcher chooses enough interviewees to be representative of the wider group (population) and that the group (sample) is not biased (see fact sheet on setting sample sizes). For example, it is not a good idea only to interview large firms unless your report then says it only represents large firms.
- What method should the researcher use? Generally speaking, written or email surveys are appropriate where you want to ask the same questions of many people and the questions are relatively self explanatory. Face to face interviews are appropriate where you have relatively few people, perhaps important people, and you want to be able to probe their answers to elicit further information.
- How will you control and monitor the quality of the research? Researchers should pilot questionnaires. They should also check the results of surveys early on, and make adjustments to the questions, interviewing technique or training of the interviewers if the results are incomplete.
- How should the researcher compile data? It is important that the researcher analyses the data systematically. Survey and interview data should be recorded in a spreadsheet or database so that statistics can be compiled precisely. Qualitative data such as comments might need to be classified before they can be recorded in this way.

Considering the analysis

There are three requirements for analysis:

- Analysis should be fair. The researcher should not distort the data.
- Analysis should be clear. The reader should be able to see from where the evidence has come.
- Analysis should be vivid. The researcher will need to spend time thinking about the best way of summarising the data, for example, which statistics or indicators to use. Generally it is better to present data graphically rather than in tables.

Considering the presentation

The final report should be clear, succinct and persuasive. Here are some ways you can ensure the quality of the final report:

- Keep the main report short. Identify the key points and put the full evidence in appendices.
- Keep the report focused. Think clearly what message you want to communicate. You might want to include recommendations, or to present these in a separate policy paper.
- Have separate summaries or series of recommendations for different audiences.
- Have a mix of types of evidence. Include precise statistics showing the individual or global impact, but also include case studies or stories to personalise the impact.
- Make sure that the conclusions flow logically from the data.
- Ensure that the report looks good. Think about the formatting. Check that the report has no spelling mistakes.